

The College Application Essay

Salisbury School
February 2017

True or False?

The essay is the most important part of the application: it can get me in or keep me out.

Mostly false: a good essay is only one asset among assets that result in an admit - and a weak essay is only one liability among liabilities that result in a deny - but an offensive or badly written essay can keep you out.

Three unfortunate essays

If Holy Cross were an inanimate object, it would be an overflowing trash dumpster. (metaphor misfires)

While I was trudging up hills in Rwanda, I realized how lucky I am to have my car.

Later in the day I puked three times.

True or False?

Admissions officers don't really read the essays.

False - but with a grain of truth in some huge, overworked admissions offices.

Two admissions teams

A mid-sized research university:

Total admissions counselors: 24

Total applications: 28,000

Essays per application: 1 long, 2 short

Length of reading season: 8 weeks

Number of reads per application: 1

Minutes spent on each application: 2-3

Decision made by single reader, in some cases.

YOUR ESSAY MUST GRAB THE READER!

Second admission team

A small liberal arts college:

Total admissions counselors: 9

Total applications: 3,800

Essays per application: 1 long, 2 short

Length of reading season: 8 weeks

Number of reads per application: 4

Minutes spent on each application: 15-30

Committee meets as a whole, discusses and votes on each applicant.

YOUR ESSAY MUST HOLD UP WELL!

What are the readers looking for when they read?

To see if you can write well enough for their college programs.

To get a “snapshot” of you that is designed and delivered by you.

To get a sense of whether your values and style would work at their college.

To see if you care enough about the college to take some time writing to it and about it.

THE ESSAY IS THE ONLY APP ELEMENT YOU CAN TOTALLY CONTROL.

True or False?

Many of the topics ask me to write about a “significant experience,” so I should write about a big event: my parents’ divorce or my grandfather’s death.

False: The “significance” of an event can be its ability to reveal aspects of your personality and character.

Ideas for “significant events”

An event that changed your mind.

A time when you felt out of place.

An occurrence that made you think less of someone. - or think of yourself differently

An event that conforms in surprising ways to the required topic.

An event that involves a telling interaction with someone else.

Traumatic or dramatic events work, too, IF you can handle them well.

Some effective choices of “significant events”

An essay about collecting Pez dispensers with Dad

A humbling experience in Mexico, when a boy couldn't fix a clock he promised his host family to fix “easily”

“Riding the Pine” - an essay arguing that sitting on the bench built NO character

Taking a refrigerator-sized pet pig to a museum Pet Show

Each essay told more about the perception of the event than about the event itself.

True or False?

I shouldn't write a humorous or "goofy" essay.

True AND false. Humor is difficult to achieve, and it can misfire easily. Be very careful with a humorous topic.

But a bit of a light approach to topics - even serious topics - can be welcome.

Some successful light/humorous topics

A boy's belief that he is the "human incarnation of his blue 1984 Volvo Turbo stationwagon."

(essay reveals the boy's understanding of his values and personality)

A boy's story about a relatively benign encounter with the law: at age 14, while his parents were out for dinner, he drove his mother's car very slowly around the block. A police car pulled him over, and he had to stand in the headlights dressed in only a pair of boxer shorts, while his neighbors drove by.

(essay goes on to say that since that day he has been a model citizen - he learned a hard lesson!)

True or False?

My life at home and school isn't all that exciting, so I should write about a trip I took (or a community service/mission trip with my church).

False: Admissions officers see these topics far too often. It's tough to be fresh or memorable when writing about these topics. If you can do it skillfully, okay.

Again, write about your perception of these topics

Instead of writing about “the trip,” write about an event/person during the trip that

- made you change your mind
- taught you about a place or person
- influenced you for the better
- turned out to be ironic
- enlightened you culturally

Focus on what the event meant to you, not on describing the event itself.

True or False?

Right now, sports are the most important thing in my life, but I shouldn't write about them - the football essay is a cliché.

True AND false: You do have to work harder to avoid clichés when you write about sports, but it can be done. Again, take a different approach:

- write about halftime instead of the game
- argue against traditional sports philosophy
- tell a story peripherally related to a sport
- relate your athletic self to your academic self

Other tough topics: tackle with care

A personal faith experience

Anything involving sex or violence

Anything sounding culturally arrogant

Community service at a country club

Death of a parent

Your parents' recent/ongoing divorce

Your serious illness or disability

The “college essay essay” about writing the essay

How every item in your bedroom reflects YOU

Your turn: vote on the following essay-openers

Become a committee member:

Many members of admissions committees are fairly recent alumni of the college or graduates of other colleges; they are not much older than you.

Others are middle-aged: senior staff and professors, mostly.

All are overworked and underpaid, so they care enough about college and learning and campus participation to make sacrifices.

All have read thousands of essays.

Two more rules for your identity as readers

*The Friday Factor is in effect.

Imagine that as you read it's late on a rainy Friday afternoon, and your co-workers are already out having fun, waiting for you. You have read over 250 essays this week - and maybe over 500.

Rule: Don't be ponderous or wordy or dull.

*The essay must also pass the Chess Test.

The essay you've read before beginning each of these essays tells the inspiring story of competitive chess saving the life of an inner-city boy. Published in the NYT.

Rule: Avoid topics like, "My car is the ugliest one in the student parking lot" or your family's good time in an Italian villa

Thumbs Up or Down?

(with colleges' reactions)

Personally, I would never bury a time capsule. I buried one in fifth grade and it seemed useless.

Thumbs up from Penn

As a child, I always knew that my room was a place where I could rely on things.

Thumbs up from Vassar

Art created with emotions is boundless. (epigraph quoting same author of essay)

Thumbs down from Vanderbilt

Thumbs Up or Down?

All I remember from Rio is a topless lady at the hotel swimming pool; we all were staring at her.

Thumbs down from Duke

The topless beach is the first thing I remember.

Thumbs up from Duke

(REMEMBER: FEMALES ARE READING: this is not the place for locker-room conversation.)

Thumbs Up or Down?

The coughing came first, the hacking in the middle of the night. Then there were the multiple doctor visits. . . (about his father's death)

Thumbs up from Penn

From an early age, we accept death as the inevitable but do not comprehend its actual denotation.

Thumbs down from Vassar

Ode to Dad - essay explains her father's values by describing his hands, encrusted with dirt from career as a truck farmer.

Thumbs up from Penn

The Basics

Write in your own, authentic voice.

Be informal but not casual.

Use contractions if you wish.

Use the personal pronouns I, we, me, us.

Open with a “hook.”

Tell a story; interpret the story only as much as you need to.

Respond to the exact topic and # of words.

Show, don't tell.

Edit, edit, edit. . . .

Telling vs. showing

My granddad is very sweet, even though he can be an annoying old man.

(telling)

He watches TV with the volume turned all the way up; he drives 35 miles an hour with one foot on the brake and his blinker on whether or not he happens to be turning. But behind my grandparents' house is a rose garden with 150 rosebushes, all of which PaPa planted and tended. . . .

(showing)

Some topics chosen by Salisbury students

Experience a new pilot's first solo flight - mistakes and all.

An applicant attends a Bruce Springsteen concert with his former-hippie parents.

Helping a grandparent with Alzheimer's move to a nursing home.

A family's favorite activities at an ancient family lake house.

How the world looks to a color-blind person.

Playing games with a Down's Syndrome boy.

Meditations on sailing as sport and metaphor.

Extreme athlete babysits prissy little girl.

- The applicant's grandmother's culinary eccentricities, and how they shaped his family.
- Visiting a developing country where the applicant's family once lived in poverty.
- The music soundtrack that would accompany my life
- Humorous description of the applicant's first breakfast with his Spanish host family.

But remember...

Good writing sometimes
breaks all the rules, so
take some risks (but get
good, honest feedback).

GOOD LUCK!

“Assignment”

Go home tonight and do three things:

Find an essay or two or three that you have already written, which could be adapted to be a college essay.

Write down three ideas for topics while this workshop is fresh in your mind.

While you're at it, find a graded academic essay and put it in a safe place for use in an application that requires one.

»Questions?